

# THE ACTIVE MILITIA OF CANADA.

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*Lecture delivered on the 24th February, 1892, before the Military  
Institute at Toronto*

BY

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COMMANDING THE 35TH BATTALION OF ACTIVE MILITIA.

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The first part of Col. O'Brien's lecture is Historical, and points to the sources from which the various races comprising the population of Canada derived those warlike instincts which manifested themselves at so many subsequent periods in their history. It refers to the Pioneers of New France, and to the Colonists in the British Provinces, and especially those of New England ; and to the circumstances in the condition of these early settlers, which fostered and encouraged a military spirit ; to the revolutionary war which drove into Canada the U.E. Loyalists, and the powerful influence exercised by them in the further development of that spirit ; and then traces through the subsequent history of the country the effect which the spirit so developed had upon many important occasions.

The second part of the lecture relates to the military spirit now prevailing in the country, as manifested in the formation of the existing militia force. In describing that, Col. O'Brien said :—

In 1855 began the formation of the force which has grown to be a truly national one—the Active Militia—Her Majesty's Army in Canada. No country has any right to claim the attribute of nationality which is not prepared, out of its own resources, to maintain order within its borders, and to resist aggression from without. In 1855 the then Province of Canada took the first step in that direction, and the movement, being the voluntary action of the people, was proof of the steady growth of the military spirit. Then came the Treat affair, when

the people with one voice declared that, though the quarrel was an Imperial one, and for which they were in no sense responsible, they were willing, as part of the Empire, to assume their share of Imperial defence. The Fenian raids followed, directed against Canada, not because the Canadians had done any wrong to Ireland, but because Canada, a portion of the British Empire, was most vulnerable to attack. This was an important epoch in our history. For the first time a purely Canadian force, equipped with Canadian money, drilled and commanded by Canadian officers, took the field, for self-defence it is true, but in an Imperial quarrel. The Trent affair and the Fenian raids made two things clear: first, the alacrity with which, in case of need, Canada would spring to arms; secondly, the promptitude with which Great Britain both could and would send forces to her aid. Shortly after the Fenian raid the active force was organized nearly upon its present footing, and with Confederation it was extended over the whole Dominion. But before the Dominion had arrived at the years of manhood the North-West rebellion gave a practical test of the spirit of the people, and of the capacity of its force. The events of that period are too fresh in our recollection to require any special notice at my hands. That it was from first to last a military achievement of which neither the Government, the people, nor those engaged need be ashamed, is, I think, generally admitted. It gave proof, at any rate, if proof were needed, that the warlike spirit of the Canadians had kept pace with their progress in other respects—that the shades of Wolfe and Montcalm, of Brock and De Salaberry, of our U. E. Loyalist ancestors, and of all the unnamed heroes of our earlier days, might look down with pride upon the Canada of 1885, and rejoice to think that it was worthy of its sires.

But it seems to me that the most satisfactory evidence of the existence and steady growth of the military spirit of Canada is to be found in the fact that such a force as we have now in this country is, under existing conditions, maintained at all. Neither to the officers nor men who compose it does it afford anything of profit or advantage, either social, political or pecuniary. In every kind of business or industrial pursuit membership in it is a drawback. To officers in particular it involves a loss of time and money, as well as

a considerable amount of labour. The Government recognize the force as a necessary element in our political existence, but grudge it the starvation allowance which Parliament willingly votes. Employers of labour give it no encouragement—too often do their best to hinder it. Yet, under such conditions it exists, and it flourishes. Why? Simply because in the hearts of the people there is an ingrained military spirit which will find means of development. Because there is in them the spirit of their forefathers—the spirit whose growth in the foregoing remarks I have endeavoured to trace, whose manifestations at various periods in our history I have tried to point out—the spirit which first led to the settlement of America, and which was fed and nourished by the very conditions of the existence of the early pioneers. We see it displayed in the fierce contests for the sovereignty of North America. It animated the captors of Louisburg, and it is raged in the breasts of those engaged in the death struggle on the Plains of Abraham. It nerved the U. E. Loyalists in the heroic sacrifice which drove them from every enjoyment of life to exile, hardship and penury. It led the militia of 1812 to victory at Queenston, Lundy's Lane and Chateauguay. It caused them to rise in fury in 1866 to repel the insensate Fenian invasion, and to struggle for places in the ranks of those who were sent to face the probable danger of the North-West rising. And, more than all, its steady glow keeps alive, despite the drawbacks I have mentioned, the force to which we are all proud to belong.

From the existence of the Active Force under present conditions I draw another conclusion of great practical moment. I believe that as at present constituted it is eminently suited to the country. It is so inexpensive, the whole cost being less than 25 cents per annum upon each of the population, that the most severe economist cannot find fault on that score. Being a purely voluntary force, and chiefly supported by the independent yeomanry of the country, it involves no serious burden upon our industrial resources, and affects only those who willingly assume the task. The headquarters of each corps being local, it enlists in its support a variety of local interests, and the people of the locality take a pride and interest in the efficiency of the corps, and willingly aid in its support. By simply increasing the number of men per company its numerical strength can be doubled without any

additional cost for officers or staff, and that strength could be kept up by regular recruiting at the various company and regimental headquarters. To increase its efficiency in drill all that is necessary is to call it out, for it has its own instructors always ready for use, and of the aptitude of the men for learning all the duties of a soldier I need say nothing. Experience has shown that it can be rapidly assembled, and rapidly mobilized. While democratic in theory, as regards the social status of its officers, the men have a wholesome sense of discipline which checks too much familiarity between them and their officers, even when the latter may be socially on the same level with themselves; and, as far as my observation goes, they most respect those officers who most respect themselves, and have a proper idea of what is due, if not to themselves, at least to the commission which they hold. But, say our critics, the force is composed of such shifting material that the men drilled one year are gone the next, and therefore the money spent upon them is wasted. To some extent this may be true, but, on the other hand, the very weak point of the system has its advantages. It keeps the military spirit constantly fermenting. It diffuses a knowledge of soldiering, however slight, through a large part of the adult population, and there is always a nucleus of drilled men existing in every corps who cling to it from pure love of it, who set an example, and give a pattern to the recruit, teach him his duties, instil into him a proper sense of *esprit du corps*, and impart an air of soldierly bearing. In every regiment there are enough of such men competent for the position of non-commissioned officers, and frequently for that of commissioned officers; enough also to take up and discharge all duties when the regiment is called out, while the recruits are being instructed. And the result is, taking the rural corps as a whole, that the regiment can be moved from one place to another, can be put into a train and taken out of it, marched into camp, mount its guards and pickets, pitch its tents, issue and cook its rations, maintain the strictest discipline, and all the time go on with its instruction in drill in a purpose-like and business fashion, and making progress in every military duty in a manner that astonishes the officer of the regular army. Now, can anyone suggest a system better suited to the habits and ideas of the people, or one that will bring about as good results from the same expenditure either

of money or industry? What possible system of a small regular force, such as is suggested by some, could equal it for effective results in case of any serious difficulty? Having read the endless suggestions and criticisms which are from time to time poured forth through the press, and having, what few of the critics have, a pretty thorough knowledge of the present system, its weak as well as its strong points, of its very apparent deficiencies, and of its real capacity—the former much more plain to the eye than the latter—I have no hesitation in saying that the present force, mainly created and developed by the military spirit of the country, and mainly dependent upon it for support, has, by the very fact of its existence at the present, proved itself well suited to the country, and to the resources at its command. And I am conservative enough to believe that we shall do better to improve and develop a system which has served us well in the past, and is serving us better in the present, than in troubling ourselves with the speculations of those who are too proud to enter the present force, and who spend their military spirit in pointing out the deficiencies which we in the ranks are steadily striving to overcome.

I have spoken of the difficulties under which this force is maintained, which bear so hardly upon those engaged in it. Certainly the country, which has such a force upon such easy terms, has no right to complain. We, however, who have so long borne the burden, have the right to ask that it be made less severe, as easily it might be. The best methods of accomplishing this could not properly be discussed in connection with the subject now under consideration, but thus much may be said, that the military spirit of which we have been speaking would sustain the Government in any reasonable expenditure required to meet existing deficiencies, especially when that expenditure would go directly to the improvement of the rank and file, and not to those accessories which, however useful, are not of absolute necessity.

But it will be asked, and the question is a pertinent one, and must be answered—admitting your contention to be correct, and the existence and growth of this warlike spirit to be proved, of what value is it—what are you going to make of it? A political necessity, the conditions of which may change at any time, compels us now to spend a certain sum upon military preparations, and in the spending of that

money a few enthusiastic persons like to employ themselves in playing at soldiering. It amuses them, and it does not hurt the country; but, after all, what is it but mere pastime? The only possibility of war is one in which we should be powerless. Any attempt at resistance would be useless. We should be as a child in the hands of a giant, and immediate submission would be our inevitable lot. Now, I will not attempt to answer this question from a military point of view, though seventy-five thousand of such men as in forty-eight hours the Minister of Militia could put in the field simply by doubling the strength of existing companies, would, backed by the sea and land forces which ten days would bring to our assistance, be no despicable force. But as upon the answer largely depends the future of this country, I will answer it in the spirit in which it was answered by Sir Isaac Brock just eighty years ago, when, with as heavy odds against him as we could have to meet to-day, he undertook the defence of the Canadian frontier—a defence which but for his untimely death would have been more successful and glorious than it was. He did not sit down to consider whether with ten thousand men he could meet him that came against him with twenty thousand. He simply told the people of Canada that the country was theirs, and that it was their plain duty, when wrongfully attacked, to take up arms in its defence. And in a similar spirit should we answer the question to-day. If we are not prepared to defend our country and keep it ours, we should not have undertaken to make it. We should not assume national responsibilities unless we are prepared to accept the conditions with which they are connected, and by which alone they can be maintained. And till human nature is reformed, and Christianity really governs the world, preparation for self defence, and the readiness to endure all that it may impose, is the first of national necessities. We have gone too far upon the path of national progress now to draw back from the fulfilment of this obvious duty. We cannot shrink from it unless we are prepared to abandon the work in which we have been engaged—to show ourselves false to every sentiment of manhood and patriotism—unworthy of our name and race, and of all the glorious traditions of the past. There is then a legitimate field for the exercise of the warlike spirit of our people, and an absolute necessity for its careful development; and while the work is one in which all should bear a part,

yet mainly upon those who, in no idle spirit of display, but with an earnest desire to fit themselves for the stern duties of the field, have undertaken the task of forming our Militia into an efficient military force, will rest the burden of showing that the growth of a military spirit in Canada is no idle dream—that it is a real, living element in our national life and our national progress, and as essential to its complete development as any of those which it is the duty of government to foster and encourage. Acting upon such a conviction we should go manfully and steadfastly on with our work, satisfied that while engaged in a task suited to our tastes and capacities, we are also fulfilling a duty second to none in its importance and value to the country—as much of benefit to it as of credit to ourselves.